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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 WELLINGTON 000134

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: HISTORICAL LABOUR-MAORI CHURCH ALLIANCE THREATENED
BY MAORI PARTY

REF: 04 WELLINGTON 909

Classified By: PRINCIPAL OFFICER AUCKLAND, SIRIA LOPEZ,
REASON 1.4 (D)

(U) This cable originated from AmConGen Auckland.

1. (SBU) Summary: The nascent Maori Party's impact on New Zealand politics (reftel) continues to be felt -- to the increasing discomfort of the ruling Labour party, and has raised doubts about Labour's historical alliance with an influential Maori organization, the Ratana Church. Some Ratana followers are questioning the historical Ratana Church-Labour Party alliance, putting them at odds with the Church's leader, Harerangi Meihana, a staunch Labour supporter whose son is to stand as a Labour Party candidate. In addition, the administrator of a second Ratana center, Te Omeke Marae Trust Chairman Ron Smith, has challenged Meihana's position, accusing him of politicizing the Church to the detriment of its membership and credibility. The divisions in this important Maori institution reflect the rise of an increasingly credible Maori political alternative to Labour. End Summary.

Decades-Old Alliance

12. (SBU) The Maori Party's impact on New Zealand politics continues to be felt -- to the increasing discomfort of the ruling Labour party. Recently, some members of the Ratana Church, an influential Maori organization, have been re-evaluating their Church's historical alliance with the Labour party. The Church has helped ensure Labour's almost unbroken hold on Maori-designated parliamentary seats. The alliance of mutual support between Ratana and Labour was forged in April 1936 between the Church's charismatic founder, T.W. Ratana, and then-Labour Prime Minister Joseph Savage. Since 1936, Labour has lost the Maori-designated seats only twice: in 1993 and 1996 when the New Zealand First party -- led by Maori Winston Peters -- captured the Maori vote. Labour regained the seats in 1999, but the emergence of the Maori Party in July 2004, a reaction to Labour's controversial seabed and foreshore legislation, has spurred some members of the Church to call for a re-think of its allegiance to Labour.

All in the Family

13. (U) The political importance of the Ratana Church has ensured PM Helen Clark's regular attendance (twelve years running) at the annual January celebration honoring T.W. Ratana's birthday. In 2002, the opposition National Party also started to show up for the first time. With media speculating on Maori Party inroads on Labour's "safe" Maori seats, PM Clark appeared to be taking no chances at this year's gathering: she arrived at the Ratana site near Wanganui with 27 Labour ministers and MPs in tow. The media has also been reporting Clark's successful courting of Errol Meihana, son of the Ratana Church president, to run as Labour's candidate in one of seven Maori parliamentary seats. This seat, Te Tai Hauauru, is likely to be contested by Maori Party co-leader Tariana Turia, who is also Meihana's aunt.

Church Fissures

14. (U) Errol's father, Ratana Church leader, Harerangi Meihana, has rejected rumors that the Church will break its ties to Labour. He is also reportedly insisting that followers back Labour. In so doing, Meihana has alienated some Church members -- a group which includes another son who has declared his support for the Maori Party. But it is the administrator of a second Ratana center, Te Omeke Marae Trust Chairman Ron Smith, who has been at the forefront of challenging Meihana's political position.

15. (C) In a meeting on February 4, Smith made it clear to visiting Auckland Consul General that he strongly disapproves of the close Meihana-Labour association. He confirmed that an upcoming Church synod to be held around Easter would

likely focus internal discussions on the question of political affiliation. Smith maintained that his real interest concerns Church infrastructure. He insisted that political matters are the provenance of the Church's political wing, based in Matatmata at his Te Omeke Marae, and not with the spiritual center near Wanganui. (A Ratana Church spokesman, however, has questioned Smith's assertions as being "at best debatable.") Admitting that it sounds like "sour grapes," Smith said that under Meihana's leadership, the spiritual wing had become more and more involved in politics, more and more interested in "getting on the right side of Helen Clark."

16. (C) Smith lamented the social cost of the rift) as Meihana engages in politics young Maori, left spiritually adrift, are being swept up into crime. Maori families are struggling to cope with these social strains and upheavals. The Church offers them no support. As a result, Church membership is declining. Smith contended that the Church needs to pay attention to Maori spiritual needs if it is to staunch the membership decline. (Note: We have been unable to confirm Smith's charge that institutional numbers are declining. Figures cited publicly range from 40,000 to 70,000 Ratana members. Smith, however, estimated the current number to be closer to 20,000. End Note)

16. (C) Smith further contended that the Church is also losing followers for a non-spiritual reason: members do not want to be told for whom to vote. The foreshore and seabed legislation, for example, is a matter of interest to members, important enough to sway political inclinations. Given his position as political wing administrator, Smith said he had been trying to monitor members' political feelings while making it clear to them that whom they voted for was their business. Smith believed that, rather than switching political allegiance from one political party to another, members at the Easter synod would want to reject voting directives of any kind, opting to let members make up their own minds. Maori party co-leader Tariana Turia has echoed this sentiment, saying publicly that the Labour-Ratana alliance is effectively over as no group can tell Maori how to vote.

Maori Party Prospects -----

17. (C) Both Smith and Turia believe the Maori Party is finding support among increasing numbers of Ratana followers. But when asked about the party's 2005 electoral prospects, Smith said he thought it could win 2-3 seats. He was uncertain if it could win more. He also said he did not think the Party would win any general (list) seats. Smith criticized the recent selection of "brash" Maori activist, Hone Harawira, as the Maori Party candidate for Te Tai Tokerau. Harawira, he said, was the kind of candidate who could make even liberal-minded persons vote for the right. Smith confided that he had been very embarrassed at the turnout for a Maori Party get-together at his center. Two young Ratana Church members had assured him that "thousands" would come out; the actual number had been 120. He implied that the disappointing attendance, captured by television cameras, had detracted from his center's prestige and its billing as the Ratana Church's political center. It was only after Smith heard that "no one" had turned up for the launching of Errol Meihana's political organizing committee that he had begun to feel better.

18. (C) Smith, who is himself a T.W. Ratana relative, described upcoming efforts, to be taken with the support of other Ratana family relations, to "reaffirm Church theology and infrastructure." He denied he is seeking to split the Church or to oust Meihana, his cousin. How, he asked, could he split the Church when all he is doing is "reaffirming theology, reaffirming the value of the Te Omeke site and recognizing the power of the people?" (The irony of his pressing the theological case while at the same time insisting on the separation of the Wanganui "spiritual" arm of the Church and his own "political" role was apparently lost on Smith.)

Comment -----

19. (C) Comment: Current trends are likely to bear out Smith's and Turia's predictions. It seems reasonable that a significant number of Ratana Church members, particularly the younger set, will want to make their own voting decisions -- even if the Church old guard should retain its official alliance with Labour. Furthermore, the Maori Party is likely to be the biggest beneficiary of any switched political party votes. Whatever the Church's actual membership numbers, PM Clark chose to turn up at the Ratana anniversary celebrations with an unusually large Labour entourage. She also assiduously courted Errol Meihana to run for Labour. With the emergence of a credible Maori political alternative, such moves signal that Clark wants to dispel any impression that

Labour is taking the Maori vote for granted.
Swindells